

POLISH AND LITHUANIAN TATARS

ONE HISTORY AND TWO STORIES

In my paper, I would like to discuss the current status of the ethnicity of two Tatar communities – Lithuanian and Polish – which, for almost 600 years, have been part of one *ethnos*, separated by national borders, which therefore experienced different social and political conditions a few decades ago. I would like to take a closer look at the similarities and differences pertaining to the character of the ethnicity of Polish and Lithuanian Tatars, with special focus on the impact of the above mentioned conditions on their identity. I am particularly interested in the interpretation of ethnic history shared by each group. In that context, I am going to analyse four films to show how Polish and Lithuanian Tatars have used their cultural resources, for example history and the past, (partly shared, partly different) to describe their ethnic characteristics.

According to historical sources, contemporary Polish and Lithuanian Tatars are, primarily, descendants of ‘the Golden Horde’, who settled on the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the first half of the 14th century. In those days, the population of Tartars was not numerous (estimated to have been around twelve thousand). The main concentration of the Tatar population was in Wilno (Vilnius) and its surrounding areas – Troki, Minsk, Słonim and (since the 17th century) the region of Podlasie. In the context of the issue under discussion, it is important to stress that their arrival on the territories of Lithuania, and later in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, meant, in the majority of cases, a specific location of Tatars within the space of these political entities, both in reference to the location of their settlement (geographically) and in reference to their legal status, based on the right to

land and nobility and related privileges and obligations (which does not pertain to those who were not free or who were descendants of Tatar prisoners).¹⁾

Metaphorically speaking, during a period of a few hundred years, a Tatar ethnic world had been born and developed, not a temporary world, but rather a well-established one. It had a specific character, in which such elements as religion (Islam), the noble ethos, as well as the traditions and social and cultural values of the surrounding environment, influenced each other, especially since their own ethnic language had already ceased to be their main means of communication, by the 16th century. Within this world, community life went on, new mosques were built, and cemeteries and places of remembrance established.

This situation only changed in 1918, when national boundaries divided the Tatar community for the first time. The statistics from 1930 show that there were about six thousand Tatars in Poland, and that the main areas inhabited by Tatars were the regions of Wilno, Nowogródek, Grodno and Białystok. Around two-and-a-half thousand Tatars lived in Soviet Belorussia and a little over a thousand in Lithuania.²⁾

The consequences of World War II were also crucial for the Tatars' situation, because this led to a further breakup of their ethnic group. After the change in national boundaries, some Tatars took the decision to leave their local mother country in 1945, and, together with other Polish citizens, left the territories then annexed by the Soviet Union, and moved, first of all, to the Western Territories, and then to the Podlasie region. This migration included a third of the population which had lived in Poland before the war. The borders, which were to divide the Tatar community for many years to come, not only brought about the physical alienation of members of this ethnic group, but also, in consequence, contributed to the creation of separate Tatar ethnicities.

At present, according to the results of recent censuses, less than two thousand Polish Tartars inhabit Poland (1,916)³⁾, there are less than three thousand in Lithuania (2,793)⁴⁾, whereas there are just over seven thousand in Belarus (7,316).⁵⁾

¹⁾ Borawski (1986).

²⁾ Miśkiewicz (1990).

³⁾ www.stat.gov.pl, day access: 29 08 2017.

⁴⁾ www.osp.stat.gov.lt, day access: 29 08 2017.

⁵⁾ <http://census.belstat.gov.by>, day access: 29 08 2017.

Even during the inter-war period, the community functioned under the common name of 'Polish-Lithuanian Tatars', which had historic connotations. Today, however, we speak of 'Polish Tatars', 'Lithuanian Tatars', and 'Belarusian Tatars'. As a result of the above mentioned historical events, the borderland Tatar community underwent spatial dispersion and their cultural world - sometimes referred to as the *Tatarszczyzna* - fell apart. In its place, local Tatar communities arose.

In my opinion, this 'ethnonym' (composed of two elements) can serve as an interesting indicator of the identity of contemporary Tatars. Firstly, it informs us of the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars' common origin, their ethnic history, their culture or specific Muslim religiosity, which, when considered together, signify the separate, unique character of this historic community.

Moreover, this allows us to differentiate this community from other Tatars, for instance those from the Crimea or Kazan, with whom they feel a certain bond, as well as a certain distance, resulting from their different histories, customs and language (this was important to those Tatars living in the Soviet Union).

Secondly, the adjective 'Polish' or 'Lithuanian' or 'Belarusian' is not merely a territorial indicator of a group's roots in the meaning of contemporary state locations, but also, as the case of the Polish Tatars shows, a national identification, or, in the case of the Lithuanian or Belarusian Tatars, a potential piece of information regarding cross-community ties or citizen loyalty.

It is possible to show a difference in the manner in which each of those countries has managed its ethnic and cultural diversity (a mono-ethnic model of the state in Poland, a multi-ethnic one in the Soviet Union), the freedoms or limitations in expressing ethnic or religious values, the different logic of inter-cultural contacts, for instance, in reference to possible relations between other Muslim or Tatar groups, from the Crimea or Kazan, in the case of the former Soviet Union, or relative isolation, in the case of Poland, and many other factors which have influenced the condition of their culture. Following the change in political systems, each state has formulated new formal and legal rules for the co-existence of ethnic or national groups within their territory. For example, in Poland, Tatars are considered an ethnic minority, whereas in Lithuania, they are a national one, and in Belarus, they are an ethnic community.

The scope and character of losses was also different within the ethnic resources of each group during the period of socialism, pertaining to material culture (mosques and cemeteries). Therefore, different kinds of issues became

important for each, after the changes of more than 20 years ago. The political context, and also the character of nationalism of the dominant groups in individual countries, had a unique impact upon the shape and semantic content of the Tatars' collective identity, and *ipso facto*, upon the way their ethnicity was managed. Polonization and Sovietization, in the case of Tatars of the former Soviet Union, and later Belarusianization or Lithuanianization, have been important factors influencing individual communities within the recent decades. The institutional dimension of the functioning of each community, its religious and ethnic leadership, are also located locally in accordance with the logic of the inner-group relations, aims and tasks, which exist there.

Metaphorically speaking, the Tatar element carries some cultural similarities, which are recognizable and communicated by members of the group, as well as by those outside the group. However, another element – let's call it a 'geographical' one – suggests many differences.

After these general considerations, I would like to take a closer look at the similarities and differences pertaining to the condition and character of the ethnic identity of Polish and Lithuanian Tatars, with special focus on the identity and ethnic history shared by each group.

As I have mentioned, my paper is based on an analysis of documentaries. Two of them were produced under the auspices of Tartar communities. The Lithuanian one is entitled, *I am a descendant of Tartar Murza* (2007), and was produced by, among others, 'the Union of the Tatar Communities of Lithuania'. The Polish documentary, entitled, *Kruszyniany. Historia i współczesność Tatarów polskich* (2006) [*Kruszyniany. Polish Tartars in history and the present day*], was made by persons from within the group, and produced in cooperation with 'the Muslim Religious Union in Poland', among others. The other two films I analysed are also about Polish Tartars. They were placed on YouTube, and produced by persons from the outside the Tartar community. The first one, *Lipkowie XXI*, [*Lipka Tartars of the XXI century*] was filmed in 2013, and the other was simply called *Tatarzy*, [*The Tartars*] which was released in 2011. I have chosen two extra films, because the one which was produced by Polish Tatars themselves was dedicated, first of all, to Kruszyniany as a village, and as a place where a mosque is located. I needed more Tatar voices to be heard.

The question is: what kind of image of group characteristics is communicated through this medium? Due to the limits of this text, I shall focus on three issues:

First of all, as can be seen by watching these films, both Tatar groups agree that religious and ethnic factors influence each other in the process of

defining ethnic boundaries. In the film, those interviewed often stated: "We have survived thanks to our religion." We can identify a process involving the ethnicisation of religion, or alternatively, about a strong religious component to ethnicity. The character of religious practice is also similar. As we can see, Islam, which is practised in both communities, was described as having a local character, and described as 'Tatar Islam' or 'our Islam'. Members of both groups, as they stated, are aware of the differences between their religious practice and those of other Muslims. This does not change their pride in their religiosity, which has survived, as they claim, for a long time, in a sea of Christianity. In these films, almost the same kind of pictures and spoken descriptions were presented. We could see: similar-looking mosques, cemeteries, religious books and prayers. What is striking, however, and what could easily mislead a less attentive audience, is which particular Tartar group is being presented, as they appear so similar.

Another issue concerns the similarities in the context of cultural practice, in using history to communicate ethnic distinctness on the one hand, and their place in a nation-state in which they are a minority, on the other. Both groups were described as communities which have lived here (in Poland or Lithuania) for a long time. The mantra-like sentence, "we have been living here for six hundred years," is often repeated. While talking about their settlement, they emphasize the role of Tatar military service in the Lithuanian and Polish armies. They also mentioned the noble status awarded to some Tatars by the Grand Dukes of Lithuania and Polish kings. While describing their view of these six hundred years of settlement, the narrator recalled a few historical figures whom they cherish, and whose deeds they value. For Lithuanian Tatars, these are the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, Giedym and his son Witold and King Jagiełło. For Polish Tatars: Duke Witold, King Władysław Jagiełło and the Polish king Jan III Sobieski. The latter does not appear in the Lithuanian account, because he is the hero of Polish Tatars, having founded the Tatar settlement in Podlasie, which is the symbolic centre of the Tatar community nowadays.

They were described as patrons of the Tatar settlement as they had been given land and granted privileges. They also recalled the battles, which had been important for both the Polish and Lithuanian armies, and which had shown the spirit and loyalty of a Tatar soldier over the centuries. Interestingly enough, both films presented the same historical characters, only the narration based on them somewhat differed. Its main theme was the Tatars' merit in the military field. The narrative of the stories had a specific slant, however.

For instance, the Lithuanian Tatar spoke about the participation of their predecessors in the Battle of Grunwald, among the troops of Duke Witold. The Polish Tatars, on the other hand, although they did not omit the battle of Grunwald altogether, stressed their merit in uprisings or on the fronts of World War II. They recalled a myth about how one of their predecessors had saved the life of King Jan III Sobieski.

Metaphorically speaking, when building their historical narrations, Tatars in both groups would weave their own history into the history of the dominating group, Lithuanian and Polish respectively. They did, however, recognise their common Polish-Lithuanian heritage, hence the term 'Polish-Lithuanian Tatars' in the films. Yet the conception of ethnic history being portrayed for the purpose of the documentaries was a report on the history of the group's belonging, on the one hand to a given state, and on the other a story about their contributions to Lithuania and Poland as two currently separate states.

History may be regarded as an implement used to serve the interests of the present day. In both cases, it seems to have been employed to legitimize the right of both communities to be 'here.' Such a narrative is typical for minority groups with a migratory origin and which are striving for recognition from the dominant group. Both groups are similar in this respect.

The third issue I would like to mention, is the manner in which Polish and Lithuanian Tatars have been presented in the context of identity markers. We can say metaphorically, that this part of the ethnonym of both groups, which refers to being a 'Tatar', has a similar connotation.

The manner in which the communities were described in categories, coming from sociological vocabulary used to describe culture and ethnicity, was different. In the Lithuanian documentary, the Tatar community was presented as a nation which has its history in the territory they inhabit, namely Lithuania, and as a distinct group which has its own cultural features (primarily religious), history, places of worship, material and symbolic resources.

In the narrative concerning Polish Tartars, a group of 'Polish Tatars' or 'Tatar Poles' was primarily under discussion, a description which did not refer to their place of residence, but rather to national or civil aspects of their identity. The statements in the films describe 'Poles of Tatar descent' as a group with a praiseworthy past but a less certain present, a community significantly tied to Polish identity, being loyal towards it in a symbolic manner, based both on history and their current situation. Sometimes, the characters regarded the assimilation of Tatars as an inevitable process.

We can regard the Tatar ethnicity as being more assertive in its manner in its Lithuanian version, and less distinct in its Polish version, although it still sometimes asserts itself.

To interpret the difference, we can refer to two categories. As I mentioned before, the post-war period was a key period for both communities. When living in totalitarian countries, neither community was able to realise their ethnic aspirations fully and in their own way, which contributed to a weakening of their ethnicity. However, official policy governing the organization of ethnic relations differed markedly in both countries. When formulating its vision of a homogeneous Polish society, the Polish state marginalized the issue of ethnic and cultural diversity. Anything not of Polish provenance was concealed, not only in public, but also in private.

Lithuania, on the other hand, as a part of the Soviet Union, and like other Soviet republics, was placed in a completely different reality in respect to national issues. In accordance with its politics, as R. Brubaker points out, not only did the state have a multinational character, but also each of its citizens was included in a system of ethnic classification within which he/she had been placed obligatorily. The person's ethnic origin, inherited from their parents, and recorded in identity documents, was the key element of a person's legal status.⁶⁾ Naturally, we can ponder upon the role and extent of the influence of nominal identity on shaping the identity of an individual person or a community. In my opinion, this factor was important in the case of Lithuanian and Polish Tatars, at least on the level of group habitus. When asked about their nationality, many Polish Tatars answer "Polish", whereas, Lithuanian Tatars answer "Tatar". In Poland, it is hard to be a Tatar, while in Lithuania, it is hard not to be one.

In conclusion, I would like to mention just one further important factor, which may help explain the Polish identity of Polish Tatars and the Tatar identity of Lithuanian Tatars. This is the specific nature of Polish nationalism in which the Polish Tatars live, namely ethno-religious nationalism, which excludes the 'other', particularly those of a different provenance and faith. While in Lithuania, within the country's historical frontiers, Tatars felt at home in a place where they had laid down roots, a fact that was identified, or recognized, or expressed in words, by my Lithuanian interlocutors. In Poland, however, the borders of which, after 1945, included only a part of the old territories the Tatars inhabited, their fate became uncertain. This must have

⁶⁾ Brubaker (1996).

been one of the reasons why part of the elite created the image of Tatars, on the basis of inter-war traditions, as the familiar ‘other’, different in respect of their descent and religion, but loyal toward the Polish state, settled ‘here’ (in the Republic of Poland, not Lithuania) for the last six hundred years, and who were loyal and devoted Polish citizens. Lithuanian Tatars could maintain the continuity of their settlement. Polish Tatars, metaphorically speaking, had to grow their roots in Poland all over again.

One of the musical motifs in the Lithuanian documentary is a song, the words of which can be paraphrased as follows: “I have lived in Lithuania for six hundred years already, my home is here, and in the distance the Crimean shore. I am a descendent of the Crimean *murza*.”

Polish Tartars already have a different song of their own.

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